

Women and Water

Climate Change in the Caribbean



Climate change was first identified as a priority area of concern, requiring urgent action in [Agenda 21](#). This was repeated at the 1994 global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in Barbados. The SIDS Programme of Action, adopted at that meeting called for:

“full attention ...to be given to gender equity and to the important role and contribution of women, as well as to the needs of women and other major groups, including children, youth and indigenous people”.

Although much has been written about the global adverse effects of climate change in the Caribbean subregion in recent years, very little attention has been directed to the role and function of women in the midst of the climate change crisis.

Among the direct impacts of climate change are the changes in rainfall patterns and the resulting decreased availability of freshwater; the increased fallout from floods and/or droughts and the concomitant effects on agricultural infrastructure and food security.

The stark reality of the decreased availability of water in the Caribbean subregion is the disproportionate impacts on women. It is unfortunate that policy-makers tend to ignore

and/or overlook the fact that women are the ones with major responsibility for the management of water in the household.

Numerous studies on gender have identified gender biases in the intra-household differences in incomes which have differential impacts on access to resources for women and men. Despite these findings, the household is still treated as one where the male is the head who takes responsibility for the interests of all its members. The role of women as active decision makers within the household is therefore still not fully acknowledged.



This is very evident in the area of water management, particularly in relation to water for irrigation, which is regarded as a male domain. Consequently, it is wrongly assumed that women do not need independent access or entitlement to water. Women generally tend to crops, particularly for household consumption, and they have the primary responsibility for childcare and other reproductive responsibilities in the care economy, including cleaning, cooking and washing. Lack of access to water,

therefore, make these responsibilities more burdensome, particularly in situations where women do not have access to pipe-borne water.

The status of women and their lack of economic and cultural power may provide some insights into explaining why issues of water access and sanitation do not attract the attention that they deserve. Policies need to be adopted to address the gender issues in climate change with respect to the management of water. In this context, the mainstreaming of gender in policies which aim to assist the subregion in its adaptation to climate change should be seen as a priority one, not only in the context of national development planning but more importantly in public and private investment decisions, for example, the privatization of water.

The fact that it is women who are disproportionately impacted from the trend to privatize water should not be ignored. As a direct result of trade liberalization, the Caribbean subregion is being targeted by private interests in water, for example, the Prime Minister of Saint Lucia in his address to the nation in July 2007, announced that the Government was considering the privatization of its water sector.

The privatization of water wherever it takes place, is likely to have serious implications for large sections of the population, particularly female-headed households and the poor, because of increased costs for water supply. In addition to water supply, the other key areas of concern which are likely to directly impact on women at the level of the household are agricultural development and land-use policies, which will also have consequences for food security.



Women and Water brief was produced by Sheila Stuart, of the Statistics and Social Development Unit of ECLAC Subregional Headquarters for the Caribbean

1 Chancery Lane,
P. O. Box 1113,
Port-of-Spain,
Trinidad and Tobago
Tel: (868) 623-5595;
Fax: (868) 623-8485;
e-mail: registry@eclacpos.org
Website: www.eclacpos.org

